

**Biotic Rights and Political Ecology:**  
***James Nash's Ecological Vision and Lessons from Zimbabwe***  
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**Introduction**

In his book *Loving Nature*,<sup>1</sup> James Nash offers us a vision for “ecological integrity and Christian responsibility” toward nature. Speaking out of his Wesleyan tradition, Nash presents how “love is the integrating center of the whole Christian faith and ethics”<sup>2</sup> and how a Christian ecological ethics is deficient and inconceivable if it is not grounded in Christian love. He defines his conception of love in a multi-dimensional manner, which includes love as beneficence, other-esteem, receptivity, humility, understanding, communion, and justice.<sup>3</sup> Nash then argues that love intimately relates to concerns for justice, and how justice concerns matters of rights and responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

Nash’s connection of love with justice, primarily his understanding of love as ecological justice, has political implications. My presentation explores the political dimensions of Nash’s ecological vision. While Nash explores the implications of his ecological vision on political economy, he focuses less on political ecology. Political ecology concerns itself with the complex relations between nature and society; that is, human political activity in society can be contingent on changes in the environment in the same way that changes in the environment are contingent on human political activity. My presentation will offer the case study in Zimbabwe as an example of how changes in the environment can lead to a political movement which is able to transform the political activity of a society.

**People, Politics and Public Policy in Ecology**

In *Loving Nature*, James Nash offers 8 biotic rights as part of Bill of Biotic rights. For Nash, these rights articulate the just claims that inhere in nonhuman species and their members. As a result, human beings have a moral responsibility to safeguard these biotic rights. In order to discern how biotic rights connect with ecological concerns in Africa, my presentation addresses only one of the eight rights presented by Nash. The eighth right in Nash's Bill of Biotic Rights states that members of the biotic community have "*the right to redress through human interventions, to restore a semblance of the natural conditions disrupted by human actions.*"<sup>5</sup> I applaud this statement for expressing pragmatic political concerns. James Nash was a politically astute individual. He was a pragmatist and a politician, in the best sense of the word. He understood that ethics, including environmental ethics, had political implications. For this reason, he concludes *Loving Nature* by offering some political directions for ecological integrity. Politics, according to Nash, is "an essential means for realizing the desirable."

Politics is not only about the mastery of the methods of power... politics is about the responsible use of power to bring ethical goals like justice to fruition.

Ethically, politics is the way that a pluralistic society ought to govern itself in order to insure that all parties in conflict have a say in decisions, to conciliate rival interests, and to advance social peace and justice. It is a means not only of controlling social evils, but also of promoting the general welfare.<sup>6</sup>

Nash goes on to argue how the essential moral problem is not the presence of politics in society, but rather the absence or perversion of politics. While Nash argues against anthropocentrism

throughout *Loving Nature*, he still ultimately resorts to anthropogenic means of redressing ecological crises.

Nash is realistic in observing the anthropogenic means of redressing ecological problems. That is, Nash is rational to observe that human beings have a responsibility to redress and resolve problems caused by humans with the environment. Public policy is the political domain he concludes as having the most effective means for resolving ecological problems. The political directions he concludes with relate primarily to the standards by which ecologically sound and morally responsible public policy ought to have. No doubt that Nash's focus on public policy is an expression of his commitment to the work of the Center for Public Policy with which he worked. However, the conclusion that the human community is ultimately responsible – through “human interventions” – to redress ecological problems, as the eighth biotic right states, neglects an important role that the environment itself plays as a political party.

While Nash's whole argument rests on asserting the intrinsic value of nature from which his biotic rights stem, one question to ask is regarding nature's role in politics. If one is to assert the presence of biotic rights, how does nature or the environment act in the political discourse? And how does one account for the role that nature or the environment plays in politics? The answers to these questions may be found in the developing discourse in the field of political ecology.

### **People, Politics and Political Ecology:**

The field of political ecology is one that has been concerned with the complex relations between nature and society. In political ecology, not only can changes in the environment be contingent on human political activity, but human political activity in society can also be

contingent on changes in the environment. Originally, scholars in the field sought to analyze the forms of access and control over resources (human and natural) and implications for ecological integrity. Traditionally, political ecology seeks “to expose flaws in dominant approaches to the environment favored by corporate, state, and international authorities, working to demonstrate the undesirable impacts of policies and market conditions, especially from the point of view of local people, marginal groups, and vulnerable populations.”<sup>7</sup> Political ecology thus enters the “power politics” discourse by asserting that changes to the environment are often contingent outcomes of power imbalances, primarily in the human community. As such, the original thrust in political ecology saw changes in the environment as being contingent on human political activity; however, an integrative political ecology now sees the natural environment as a political unit itself.

Political ecology concerns itself with the interdependence and interrelationships between human political units and their natural environment. There are four main theses of political ecology that try to explain the complex nature of relations between nature/ the environment and society.<sup>8</sup> One thesis tries to explain environmental “change” using a narrative of degradation and marginalization. For example, land degradation, long blamed on marginal people, is put in a larger political and economic context.<sup>9</sup> Political economy, which Nash deals with in *Loving Nature*, becomes central to discerning ecological integrity and human responsibility.

A second thesis, although related to the first, tries to explain problems in environmental “access” using a narrative of environmental conflict. That is, “Environmental conflicts are shown to be part of larger gendered, classed, and raced struggles and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup> Existing and long-term conflict within and between human communities are given ecological dimensions through human environmental policies and practices. This second thesis relates to a third, which tries to

explain the dynamics of social upheaval in ecological terms. Using a narrative of environmental identity and social movement, “political and social struggles are shown to be linked to basic issues of livelihood and environmental protection.”<sup>11</sup> Here, changes in environmental control, management, or conditions are seen as creating opportunities, and sometimes imperatives, for local groups to secure and represent themselves politically.

A fourth thesis examines the dynamics of failures in conservation and control processes. This fourth thesis connects, for me, to Nash’s eighth biotic right. As human efforts to redress ecological problems fail, the fourth thesis hints at the political dimensions of an environment that acts back on human communities and, at the least, does not always bend to the will of human activity without protest. The most convincing example of this phenomenon is the effects of global warming and global climate change. Scientist studying changes in the global climate accredit it to the impact of human activity. Now, political movements in response to global climate change are beginning to find momentum arguing that, if the human community does not change its behavior, the results will be catastrophic. The argument can thus be made that nature is beginning to act back and some, in society, have taken the political mandate and lead from nature itself to act on behalf of and with nature.

Whereas the first three theses largely concern with relations between the environment and human political units, the fourth thesis in political ecology helps to assert the possibility of viewing nature or the environment as a political unit itself. That is, examining the dynamics of environmental change to include nature’s impact on human activity leads to the proposal of a fifth thesis. A fifth thesis would explore the dynamics of how nature can be viewed as a political unit with the political capacity to act back on society. Such a thesis would resonate with Nash’s argument for the necessity of biotic rights. The use of rights language belongs in the domain of

politics; politics being the means to promote the general welfare, which includes the welfare of the natural environment.

Nash's presentation of biotic rights is ingenious because he opens the door for political ecologists to examine how nature or the environment acts in the political discourse. He points to the importance of a fifth thesis, in political ecology, that seeks to account for the role that nature or the environment plays in politics. Inevitably, this fifth thesis will be related to the third thesis which finds environmental changes creating imperatives for local groups to represent themselves politically. The argument can be made that human beings can stand in solidarity and in community with the natural environment as they try to redress environmental problems, promoting human and ecological wellbeing together.

In the following discussion I will engage the discourse in political ecology to examine the nature of the interdependence and interrelationships between human political units and their natural environment. In particular, I will engage the roles of religious communities in Zimbabwe as political units, acting in response to and on behalf of the natural environment; but, more importantly, recognizing the environment as having rights which need to be safeguarded. I will posit this as having the potential of transforming the landscape of political ecology in Africa.

### **Lessons from Zimbabwe in Political Ecology:**

The following discussion explores the struggles over knowledge, power and practice as consequently relating to ecological conflict. Ecological conflict describes not only the ecological dimension of human conflict but also the conflict between the humanity and the natural environment. That is, not only do political processes have consequences on the environment, but changes in the environment have political consequences as well. A case study in Zimbabwe can

help illustrate the dynamics of this conflict, and the subsequent role of human political units in transforming the conflict. I wish to do so in order to point out how the religious environmental movements of tree planting in Zimbabwe cannot make a lasting impact without incorporating the political dimensions of ecological integrity.

In the mid-1990s, Zimbabwe began a controversial Land Reform program that sought to transfer white-owned farmlands to native black Zimbabweans. The program was largely politically motivated but having wider consequences, including ecological, socio-economic and political.<sup>12</sup> While the land reform program, allegedly, sought to address the plight of the poor in Zimbabwe, the actual political process did quite the opposite.<sup>13</sup> Poor communities living in rural areas largely felt the environmental effects of the political process. The political situation in Zimbabwe led to a declining economy with the highest inflation rates in the world being recorded in the country. The crashing economy destabilized many social, economic, and political institutions leading to an increase in unemployment rates where three-fourths of the nation was unemployed. The high rates in unemployment led some to assume methods of subsistence living, which meant returning to a way of life increasingly dependent on the natural environment for an already marginal population. Whereas electricity has supplied the power for cooking stoves in the cities, for instance, the harvesting of firewood became a necessary alternative no longer for rural communities alone but also urban inhabitants. Whereas the raising of livestock had once sustained a meat diet for many people, the turned economy led some to resort to wildlife hunting, a practice that had been left to the marginal poor of the country.

With nearly half of Zimbabwe's poor living in marginal rural areas, the environment had already been in crisis long before the land reform program. The land reform program in Zimbabwe only exacerbated a political process that had begun with post independence

development policies supported by the World Bank and IMF. As a result, some religious communities in Zimbabwe began to respond to the nation's environmental crisis. Since rural communities felt the stress of environmental changes, leaders of Zimbabwean traditional religion and independent churches began offering a response employing their religious-spiritual resources to motivate people for ecological action.<sup>14</sup> They appealed to traditional, cultural, and theological teachings for environmental integrity.<sup>15</sup> Marthinus Daneel describes one such movement in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, religious leaders sought to exercise their spiritual authority over modern processes of land and community development because they understood themselves to be custodians of the land. Once they had been central and instrumental to the struggle of political liberation and independence; however, after independence, they found themselves relatively isolated and marginalized by the very political government they had supported. "They felt powerless to do much about the problems of their people – continuing landlessness, poverty, increasing population pressure on already overcrowded communal lands, deterioration of the environment resulting in scarcities of fuel wood and poor crop yields, and so on."<sup>16</sup> Out of this experience, they were moved to organize and mobilize their constituents to address the political and environmental issues they faced.

Appealing to the rhetoric that had gained them eminence during the liberation struggle, traditional religion and independent church religious communities "declared war" on deforestation and on ecological destruction.<sup>17</sup> Whereas the quest to reclaim lost land had been a part of the slogan for the political liberation struggle, the healing of the wounded land became the new slogan in the ecological liberation war. To this end, various institutions, such as the Association of Zimbabwean Traditional Ecologists and the Zimbabwean Institute for Religious



Research and Ecological Conservation, were established to guide the process. While these institutions collaborated with other governmental and non-governmental institutions, when possible, they remained independent and operated independently.

It is unclear what role these religious communities and institutions played during the land reform program of the mid-nineties. It is unclear to how they responded to the revival of the slogan to reclaim lost lands, which was part of the political land reform program. Certainly they must have had a stake in the process especially when the same rural communities were impacted the most by the social, economic and ecological downturn that followed. Perhaps, it is here that Nash's vision for public policy may be useful for the Zimbabwean context. Nash concludes that public policy is the one political domain best equipped to engage ecological issues and, thus, offers guidelines with which to construct "ecologically sound and morally responsible public policy." Zimbabwe would have benefited from a land reform policy informed by the principles Nash outlines.

The discourse in political ecology is also helpful to the Zimbabwean case. Studies in political ecology inform how religious communities in Zimbabwe could have been a powerful political unit to counter a land reform policy that was not ecologically sound or morally responsible. Religious communities could have capitalized on their moral, social, and political capital to engage the governmental parties in constructing a meaningful land reform policy. It is arguable to what extent the government had the wellbeing of the poor in mind when they issued the land reform policy; however, had religious communities understood themselves as political units with a stake in the nation's public policy – something which they must have understood but had not capitalized on – they might have sought ways to actively and pro-actively engage the formation of ecologically sound and morally responsible public policy.

In addition, the fifth thesis in political ecology, which identifies nature as a political unit itself, might be a useful and motivating principle from which religious communities, especially traditional religions, can operate. Although traditional religious leadership understand themselves as custodians of the land, who may act on behalf of the land, it is also important to recognize how the land acts back, itself, and protests the destructive activity of humans on the environment. How the land's custodian act must, thus, be in concert with the political movement of the natural environment. In an African religious worldview, it is certainly conceivable to have a theology that understands God, the ancestors, or the Spirit/spirits as giving agency to the land to act back in protest to a sinning or failing humanity. By appealing to the mandate to heal the wounded and lost lands, leaders in religious communities certainly understood the interdependence of relations between society, the environment, and the divine/spiritual realm.

## **Conclusion**

Although I personally did not study with James Nash, I find him to be a model public figure whose political vision and pragmatic concerns for ecological integrity inspires Christian responsibility. Combined with lessons learned in political ecology where human community and the natural environment share political commitments to human and ecological wellbeing, Nash's political and pragmatic approach to environmental ethics provides for an integral response to the world's most pressing ecological needs. As the world's political leaders gather in a series of summits to discern our global response to global climate change, Nash's vision offers important principles to guide the political deliberations and policies coming out of these summits.

However, political ecology reminds us that there are many political actors with a stake in any public policy concerning the environment. Local communities and marginal groups,

including religious communities have a stake in the outcome of the policy making process and, more importantly, the environment itself has a stake. Political ecology reminds us that the environment is itself a political actor with a mandate that human political units discern how to account for the role that nature or the environment plays in politics. Political ecology connects the wellbeing of the environment to the wellbeing of a people because discerning the wellbeing of a people is to engage in politics; that is, political ecology engages in a public discourse, practice, and process seeking to promote the common and “commons good.”<sup>18</sup> Nash’s work in environmental ethics provides an enduring legacy for how Christian communities can responsibly participate in this political and ecological process.

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<sup>1</sup> James Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Nash, 139. The idea that love is the integrating center of all Christian faith resonates with what John Wesley taught. Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection had love as the *telos* for Christian discipleship.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-161.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 13.

<sup>8</sup> The four theses described here are explained by Paul Robbins in his introductory text in political ecology. These four theses correspond with the historical development in political ecology.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of the implication of the land acquisition program in Zimbabwe, see Sam Moyo, “The Political Economy of Land Acquisition and Redistribution in Zimbabwe: 1990-1999,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 26, No.1 (March 2000), pp.5-28.

<sup>13</sup> Over six million indigenous black people, almost half the population, live in Zimbabwe’s marginal rural lands, the communal areas. These areas have poor soils and unreliable rainfall; producers lack control of water rights and are excluded from the bulk of the nations’ natural resources.

<sup>14</sup> Studies in African Religion typically show that African Traditional Religions (ATR) and African Independent Churches (AIC) have their largest constituents living in rural communities.

<sup>15</sup> For a description of the religious response of traditional religion and independent church in Zimbabwe, see Marthinus Daneel, *African Earthkeepers: Wholistic Interfaith Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 42

<sup>18</sup> John Hart introduces this concept of a Commons Good in his work, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).